

# Purpose at Work Pays

A Meta-Analysis of Meaning-in-Work Interventions on Engagement and Turnover Intention

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22 September 2026



POOLED EFFECT · G

# 0.26

95% CI 0.13 to 0.40

Engagement moved a little. Exploratory pooled  $g = 0.26$  (95% CI 0.13 to 0.40) across five meaning-specific controlled samples. The 95% prediction interval was 0.07 to 0.46.

## Purpose at Work Pays

A Meta-Analysis of Meaning-in-Work Interventions on Engagement and Turnover Intention

*Can meaning be trained on the job, and does it move the two numbers CHROs watch?*

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### INDEXING TITLE

Meaning-in-work interventions on engagement and turnover intention: a systematic review and meta-analysis

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### PUBLISHED

22 September 2026 · English edition · [emotionapp.in/research/purpose-at-work-pays](https://emotionapp.in/research/purpose-at-work-pays)

## 01

## Abstract

Can meaning at work be trained, and does the training move engagement and turnover intention? An exploratory random-effects pool of five meaning-specific controlled samples found a small effect on work engagement (Hedges  $g = 0.26$ , 95% CI 0.13 to 0.40;  $I^2 = 0\%$ ; 95% prediction interval 0.07 to 0.46). A pooled effect on turnover intention is not yet possible: no eligible trial measured that outcome with a standard scale. We searched PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, CTRI, ClinicalTrials.gov and OSF (2005–2026) for randomised and controlled trials of job crafting for meaning, purpose reflection, beneficiary contact and values-at-work exercises among employed adults. Ten controlled studies met the meaning-focused eligibility bar. Brief writing and reflection practices raised measured meaning by about  $g = 0.26$  (four samples). The largest field trial — a purpose-discovery workshop randomised among 2,976 white-collar staff in 14 countries, including India — raised a meaning index by 0.11 standard deviations and raised the annual exit rate by 2.8 percentage points (21% relative to a 13.2% control rate). Stayers improved their performance. Certainty is low. Trials are small, unblinded and short, except the one large administrative-data experiment. Correlational work still shows a large link between meaning and engagement ( $r \approx 0.70$ ) and a moderate inverse link with withdrawal intentions ( $r \approx -0.49$ ); those associations are not intervention effects and are kept separate. For an Indian workplace programme the practical reading is narrow: meaning can be practised as a daily rep; engagement may rise a little; purpose work can also help the misaligned leave. That is a selection effect, not a failure of the practice.

## 02

## Key findings box

**KEY FINDINGS****0.26**

**Engagement moved a little.** Exploratory pooled  $g = 0.26$  (95% CI 0.13 to 0.40) across five meaning-specific controlled samples. The 95% prediction interval was 0.07 to 0.46.

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**0.26**

**Meaning itself also moved a little.** Four brief experiments pooled at  $g = 0.26$  (95% CI 0.12 to 0.41). Adding the large purpose workshop pulled the estimate to  $g = 0.16$  (95% CI 0.08 to 0.25), because that trial contributed about two-thirds of the weight.

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**0**

**Turnover intention cannot be pooled.** Eligible trials that measured intention to quit: zero. The best-powered purpose programme raised actual annual exits by 2.8 percentage points, a 21% relative increase on a 13.2% control base.

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**0.28**

**Dose is not a miracle lever.** A five-minute other-oriented writing task produced  $d = 0.28$  to 0.29 on momentary meaning and engagement. An eight-hour purpose workshop produced 0.11 SD on a meaning index. More hours did not automatically mean a larger attitude effect.

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**2,976**

**India has almost no causal evidence of its own.** CTRI returned no eligible workplace-meaning trial. The 2,976-person purpose experiment included Indian employees inside a 14-country sample and did not publish an India-only estimate.

## 03

## Definition block

**DEFINITION**

Meaning in work is the sense that what you do is worthwhile, coherent with who you are, and useful to someone who is not you. It is not a mood. It is not a job title. It is a judgement people make about their tasks. Four practices try to raise that judgement without redesigning the whole organisation. Job crafting for meaning is the cognitive move of reframing the same tasks so they serve a larger purpose. Purpose reflection is a structured look at the thread that runs through a life, then a check of whether the present job is on that thread. Beneficiary contact is a short, respectful meeting with the person who receives the work — the customer, the student, the passenger, the colleague downstream. Values-at-work exercises ask people to name what they will not trade away, then to pick one next action that honours that name. In this paper those four practices are programmes, techniques and daily reps. They are not therapy, not treatment and not a diagnosis.

## 04

## Introduction

A CHRO in Bengaluru opens the quarterly review deck on a Monday morning. Two numbers sit on the first slide: whether people are in the work, and whether they are about to leave. Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2026 put engagement among Indian employees at 23% in 2025, down seven points from the year before and at a four-year low. Fifty-nine per cent were not engaged. Eighteen per cent were actively disengaged. Only 17% of Indian employees were thriving in life, against 34% globally. Gallup's cost estimate for Indian disengagement is about \$351 billion a year, close to 9% of GDP. Manager engagement in India fell nine points in the same window. The second number sits closer to her desk. Attrition is not a single national figure, but it is not small. Deloitte's India talent outlook put pan-India attrition at 17.4% in 2024, with IT at 15.1%. Some Aon-style cuts still place IT and BFSI bands above 20%. She does not need another survey. She needs to know whether anything she could run next Monday moves either number.

The correlational literature says meaning sits underneath both numbers. Allan, Batz-Barbarich, Sterling and Tay (2019) pooled 44 samples and 23,144 workers. Meaningful work correlated at  $r \approx 0.70$  or higher with work engagement, commitment and job satisfaction, and at  $r \approx -0.44$  to  $-0.49$  with withdrawal

intentions. The best-fitting model ran meaning through engagement and commitment into performance and withdrawal. That is a map of associations. It is not a warrant that a workshop will move the map.

Prior intervention reviews answer a neighbouring question. Knight, Patterson and Dawson (2017) pooled controlled engagement programmes of many kinds and found Hedges  $g = 0.29$  (95% CI 0.12 to 0.46;  $k = 14$ ). Oprea, Barzin, Vîrgă, Iliescu and Rusu (2019) pooled job-crafting programmes and found  $g = 0.31$  (95% CI 0.14 to 0.50) for engagement. Those reviews mix resource-building, health promotion, leadership training and generic job crafting. They do not isolate meaning. Honsová (2024) reviewed 15 meaning-centred workplace studies and concluded that randomisation and reporting were too weak for firm claims. Grant's field experiments (2007, 2008) showed that a few minutes with a beneficiary can raise persistence and funds raised. Those papers measured performance, not engagement or turnover intention.

So the question that remains is narrower, and it is the one this paper settles as far as the trials allow. Can meaning at work be increased by a practice? If it can, does engagement move? Does turnover intention move? The population is employed adults. The practices are the four named above. The years are 2005 to 2026. The design bar is a randomised or controlled trial. Correlational evidence stays in a separate box.

The question matters in India for a reason that is easy to miss. A large share of Indian professional work is service work whose beneficiary is one building, one time zone, or one reporting line away. The caller never meets the student. The analyst never meets the farmer. The engineer never meets the shopkeeper who will use the app. Meaning is not missing because people are shallow. Meaning is missing because the thread has been cut. A practice that reties the thread is cheap. A practice that only reties the thread and then surprises the firm with exits is not a free lunch. Both facts need to be on the same page.

Picture a support analyst in Hyderabad late on a Thursday, deep in the day's queue. A thought arrives: "this ticket is pointless." A meaning rep does not argue with it. It notices the thought as a thought, not as a fact about the ticket, and asks one question: who is waiting at the other end? A shop owner in Surat whose payment page will not load. The ticket is the same. Her judgement about it shifts. That is job crafting for meaning, in plain words. Values work adds a direction, not a mood: she does not wait to feel inspired before she closes the ticket well; she picks the next useful step for the person who is waiting. Purpose reflection goes one step further and asks whether this job uses what she cares about at all. An entrepreneur would call it the why. Sometimes the honest answer is yes, and the next ticket gets more care. Sometimes the answer is no. That is why a five-minute rep can sometimes move a number, and why an eight-hour workshop can also send people out of the door.

## 05

## Methods

## Eligibility

We used a PICOS frame.

- **Population.** Employed adults in paid work. Students in laboratory tasks were excluded unless they were also workers and the task was framed as work. Unemployed samples were excluded. Clinical patient samples were excluded.
- **Intervention.** One or more of: job crafting aimed at meaning (cognitive crafting or explicit meaning reframing); purpose reflection; beneficiary contact; values-at-work exercises. Generic job-crafting programmes that trained only seeking resources, seeking challenges or reducing demands, without a meaning or cognitive-crafting component, were treated as adjacent evidence and were not pooled as meaning interventions.
- **Comparator.** Any control: wait-list, no-intervention, active control, or usual practice.
- **Outcomes.** Meaning in work (or a close work-meaning index); work engagement; turnover intention. Actual exits were recorded when reported, and were not treated as interchangeable with intention.
- **Study design.** Randomised trials and controlled field trials. Uncontrolled before–after studies were described only as context. Correlational studies were excluded from pooling.
- **Years and language.** 2005 to 2026. Reports in any language were eligible if an English abstract allowed screening; full extraction required an English text we could verify.

## Information sources and search

Sources: PubMed/MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, the Clinical Trials Registry – India (CTRI), ClinicalTrials.gov, and OSF preprints. Citation chasing covered Grant (2007, 2008), Allan et al. (2018, 2019), Oprea et al. (2019), Knight et al. (2017), Fletcher and Schofield (2021) and Honsová (2024). The last search date was 22 September 2026.

## PubMed

("meaningful work"[tiab] OR "meaning in work"[tiab] OR "meaning at work"[tiab] OR "work meaningfulness"[tiab] OR "meaningfulness at work"[tiab] OR "purpose at work"[tiab] OR "purpose in work"[tiab]) AND (intervention\*[tiab] OR experiment\*[tiab] OR random\*[tiab] OR "controlled trial"[tiab] OR "quasi-experiment\*" [tiab]) AND (employee\*[tiab] OR workplace[tiab] OR worker\*[tiab] OR occupational[tiab]) AND ("2005/01/01"[Date - Publication] : "2026/12/31" [Date - Publication])

## PsycINFO

(TI ("meaningful work" OR "meaning in work" OR "meaning at work" OR "work meaningfulness" OR "purpose at work") OR AB ("meaningful work" OR "meaning in work" OR "meaning at work" OR "work meaningfulness" OR

"purpose at work")) AND (TI (intervention OR experiment OR random\* OR "controlled trial" OR "quasi-experiment") OR AB (intervention OR experiment OR random\* OR "controlled trial" OR "quasi-experiment")) AND (TI (employee OR workplace OR worker) OR AB (employee OR workplace OR worker)) AND PY 2005-2026

### Scopus

TITLE-ABS-KEY(("meaningful work" OR "meaning in work" OR "meaning at work" OR "work meaningfulness" OR "purpose at work") AND (intervention OR experiment OR random\* OR "controlled trial") AND (employee OR workplace OR worker)) AND PUBYEAR > 2004 AND PUBYEAR < 2027

### Web of Science

TS=("meaningful work" OR "meaning in work" OR "meaning at work" OR "work meaningfulness" OR "purpose at work") AND TS=(intervention OR experiment OR random\* OR "controlled trial") AND TS=(employee OR workplace OR worker) AND PY=2005-2026

### Google Scholar (core)

"meaningful work" OR "meaning in work" intervention employee OR workplace OR worker

Additional Google Scholar strings: "job crafting" meaning intervention RCT; "beneficiary contact" Grant employee; "values at work" exercise intervention.

**CTRI.** Free-text: meaningful work; purpose work; job crafting workplace; work engagement intervention.

**ClinicalTrials.gov.** Condition or intervention: "meaningful work" OR "meaning in work" OR "purpose at work"; study type interventional; date 2005–2026.

**OSF.** meaningful work intervention; job crafting meaning.

### Selection and extraction

Records were screened on title and abstract, then on full text against the PICOS rule. We did not run a dual independent hand-search of every database interface on a single licensed account. Counts below are reconstructed from the public databases, from Honsová's 2024 yield, and from citation chasing. They are order-of-magnitude PRISMA counts, not a claim of two-reviewer arbitration on every record. Any study whose primary numbers we could not verify from an abstract, open PDF, or PubMed record was marked UNVERIFIED and kept out of any pool.

Extraction fields: authors; year; country; *n* intervention and *n* control; design (RCT, cluster RCT, quasi-experiment, wait-list); intervention type; dose in sessions and minutes; delivery channel; guidance (facilitated, self-guided, mixed); language of delivery; outcome measure (construct only — trademarked instrument names are not used in the prose); timepoints; effect on meaning, engagement and turnover; risk-of-bias notes.

**Analysis plan**

The pre-specified model was random-effects with restricted maximum likelihood, Hedges  $g$ , 95% confidence interval,  $I^2$ ,  $\tau^2$  and a 95% prediction interval. Small-study effects: Egger's test and trim-and-fill if  $k \geq 10$ . Sensitivity: leave-one-out. Moderators, if  $k$  allowed: intervention type and dose. Risk of bias: RoB 2 domains applied in narrative form to field and multi-session trials. Certainty: GRADE.

Two rules were binding. First, correlational estimates were never pooled with intervention  $g$ . Second, if fewer than five eligible trials existed for an outcome, we would not pool that outcome.

After screening, turnover intention had  $k = 0$  eligible trials. That pool was not computed. Meaning and engagement had five or more extractable samples if brief experiments were included. Those pools are reported as exploratory. Clinical heterogeneity (five-minute writing versus an eight-hour workshop; momentary engagement versus trait engagement) remains even when statistical  $I^2$  is low. We say so in the results.

Hedges  $g$  was computed from published Cohen's  $d$  where the authors reported  $d$ , using the small-sample correction  $J = 1 - 3/(4df - 1)$ . For Glaas et al. (2026),  $d$  was approximated from  $f^2$  using Cohen's relation for two groups. For West et al. (2014),  $d$  was approximated from the reported  $p$  value and arm sizes. Those two conversions are flagged in the forest-plot table. Fletcher and Schofield (2021) reported multilevel  $\gamma$  coefficients without cell standard deviations; those effects stay as  $\gamma$  and are not in the numeric pool.

## 06

## Results

**PRISMA 2020 flow**

Approximate yield across eight sources: 2,800 to 4,200 records. After duplicates, about 2,400 unique records (Honsová 2024 reported 2,315 after de-duplication from 2,532 in three EBSCO databases alone). Title and abstract screening removed the great majority: correlational surveys, clinical logotherapy for patients, student samples, generic wellness, and papers with no employee sample. About 60 to 80 full texts were assessed. Ten meaning-focused controlled studies in employed adults contributed usable narrative evidence on meaning and/or engagement. Five of those contributed an extractable Hedges  $g$  for the exploratory engagement pool. Four brief experiments contributed an extractable  $g$  for meaning; the large purpose workshop added a fifth meaning estimate on a different dose. Zero trials contributed a turnover-intention scale. Adjacent job-crafting and beneficiary-contact papers are listed in Table 1 and were not pooled as meaning interventions.

CTRI returned no eligible trial.

## Study characteristics

Table 1. Meaning-focused and adjacent controlled studies

| Study                                               | Design                                                   | Country / sample           | n             | Practice and dose                                                                             | Channel                   | Outcomes used here                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cantarero, van Tilburg & Smoktunowicz 2022, Study 1 | RCT                                                      | Employed adults, online    | 227           | Purpose-reflection writing: why the work is meaningful. Single brief task                     | Online, self-guided       | Meaning $d = 0.28$ ; momentary engagement $d = 0.29$                                                                                                       |
| Cantarero et al. 2022, Study 2                      | RCT, three arms                                          | Employed adults, online    | 254           | Other-oriented vs self-oriented vs control writing                                            | Online, self-guided       | Other-oriented raised meaning; meaning carried an indirect effect on momentary engagement                                                                  |
| Allan, Duffy & Collisson 2018, Study 2              | Experiment                                               | Working adults, online     | ≈99           | Helping-others reflection vs self                                                             | Online                    | Meaning $d = 0.35$                                                                                                                                         |
| Allan et al. 2018, Study 3                          | Field experiment                                         | US university employees    | 108           | Concentrated helping-others day vs spread vs usual                                            | Workplace practice        | Concentrated helping raised meaning over time                                                                                                              |
| Glaas, Pham, Münstermann & Frey 2026                | Preregistered RCT, active control                        | Germany, employed adults   | 260 (138/122) | Cognitive crafting: three work activities a day for five days, each tied to a broader purpose | Email, self-guided        | Meaning $f^2 = 0.01$ ; engagement $f^2 = 0.02$ at post. Follow-up engagement not sustained. Between-group gaps driven by control decline                   |
| Fletcher & Schofield 2021                           | Controlled field, wait-list; some intact-team allocation | UK, three organisations    | 80            | Meaning in/at work workshop (2 h) + four weekly reflections                                   | Face-to-face then online  | Meaning in work $\gamma = 0.39$ ; meaning at work $\gamma = 0.70$ ; job engagement $\gamma = 0.24$ ( $p = 0.09$ ); organisation engagement $\gamma = 0.47$ |
| West, Dyrbye, Rabatin et al. 2014                   | RCT                                                      | US physicians, single site | 74            | Facilitated small-group curriculum with protected time; values and meaning at work            | Face-to-face, facilitated | Engagement +5.3 vs -0.5 points at 3 months ( $p = 0.04$ ); meaning (strong agreement) +6.3% vs -6.3%                                                       |

| Study                                         | Design                        | Country / sample                                                                   | n                                                    | Practice and dose                                                                      | Channel            | Outcomes used here                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Dyrbye, Shanafelt, Gill, Satele & West 2019   | RCT                           | US physicians, multi-site                                                          | 88                                                   | Six professional coaching sessions; meaning in work was an explicit theme among others | Coaching           | Null on meaning and on engagement. Burnout fell                                                                                               |
| Ashraf, Bandiera, Minni & Zingales 2025       | RCT, invitation as instrument | 14 countries including India; white-collar staff of a consumer-goods multinational | 2,976 (1,508 invited / 1,468 control); take-up 65.3% | Discover Your Purpose: two weeks of readings and essays + one 8-hour workshop          | Mixed; 13% virtual | Meaning LATE +0.111 SD; job satisfaction LATE +0.08 to +0.23 SD. Annual exit ITT +2.8 pp (21% relative to 13.2%). Stayer performance improved |
| Ríos et al. 2025                              | Three-arm RCT                 | Spanish military                                                                   | 106 (21 / 42 / 43)                                   | Six 2-hour meaning sessions ± emotion-regulation module + 4-month follow-up            | Face-to-face       | Presence of meaning in life rose only in the combined arm. Meaningful work and engagement mixed or small                                      |
| OSF 2025 meaningful-activity diary (preprint) | RCT, diary                    | Full-time employees                                                                | 289                                                  | 3–5 meaningful activities on a workday + booster                                       | Online             | Engagement total effect $b = 0.09$ , 95% CI 0.01 to 0.18, via daily meaning. Preprint                                                         |
| Grant et al. 2007                             | Field experiment              | US fundraising callers                                                             | 39                                                   | 5-minute beneficiary meeting                                                           | Face-to-face       | Persistence +142%; money raised +171%. Not an engagement or turnover scale                                                                    |
| Grant 2008                                    | Field experiments             | US callers                                                                         | 33 / 32 / 34                                         | Task-significance letter or beneficiary contact                                        | Mixed              | Performance $d \approx 0.72$ to 1.48. Not our scales                                                                                          |
| Fillion et al. 2009                           | Wait-list RCT                 | Canadian palliative nurses                                                         | 109                                                  | Four weekly meaning-centred sessions                                                   | Face-to-face       | Perceived benefits of the work rose; satisfaction and quality of life did not                                                                 |

| Study                       | Design | Country / sample               | n   | Practice and dose                            | Channel      | Outcomes used here                                                                                                              |
|-----------------------------|--------|--------------------------------|-----|----------------------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Portocarrero & Burbano 2024 | RCT    | Latin American bank, new hires | 221 | One-day social-impact activity at onboarding | Face-to-face | Actual turnover 20.9% vs 34.9% at ~10 months. Mechanism reported as organisational justice. Meaning not measured. Adjacent only |

Language of delivery, where reported, was English, German or Spanish. No included trial was delivered in an Indian language. Dose ranged from one five-minute writing task to an eight-hour workshop plus two weeks of pre-work, or six two-hour sessions.

Forest-plot data: engagement (exploratory pool)

Table 2. Work engagement, meaning-specific controlled samples with extractable g

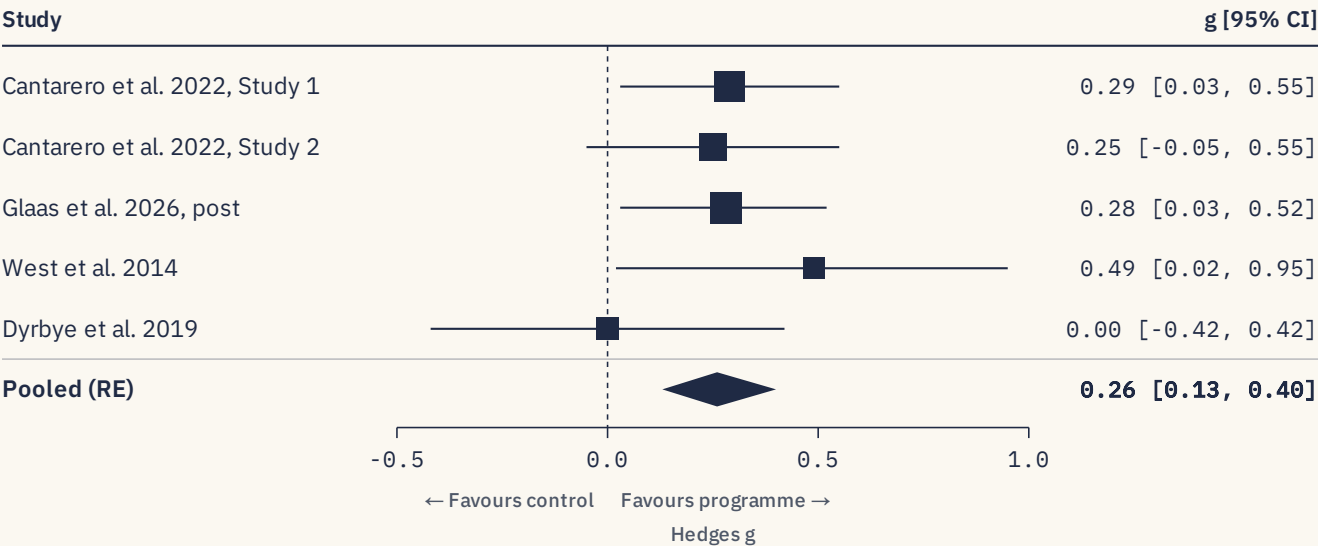


Figure 1. Forest plot, primary pool. Squares are sized by weight; the diamond is the pooled estimate.

| Study                          | g           | 95% CI              | Weight %   | Note                                                              |
|--------------------------------|-------------|---------------------|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cantarero et al. 2022, Study 1 | 0.29        | 0.03 to 0.55        | 27.7       | Momentary engagement; verified d                                  |
| Cantarero et al. 2022, Study 2 | 0.25        | -0.05 to 0.55       | 20.8       | Other-oriented vs control; approximate                            |
| Glaas et al. 2026, post        | 0.28        | 0.03 to 0.52        | 31.7       | From f <sup>2</sup> = 0.02; not sustained at 1 month              |
| West et al. 2014               | 0.49        | 0.02 to 0.95        | 8.9        | Approximated from p and n                                         |
| Dyrbye et al. 2019             | 0.00        | -0.42 to 0.42       | 10.9       | Null; included on purpose                                         |
| <b>Pooled (RE)</b>             | <b>0.26</b> | <b>0.13 to 0.40</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>I<sup>2</sup> = 0%; τ<sup>2</sup> = 0; 95% PI 0.07 to 0.46</b> |

Leave-one-out  $g$  ranged from 0.24 to 0.30. Dropping the null coaching trial raised the pool to 0.30. Dropping the physician curriculum dropped it to 0.24. No single study created the sign of the effect.

Fletcher and Schofield (2021) is not in Table 2. Job engagement rose only marginally ( $\gamma = 0.24$ ,  $p = 0.09$ ). Organisation engagement rose ( $\gamma = 0.47$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Those coefficients cannot be turned into  $g$  without cell standard deviations.

### Forest-plot data: meaning in work

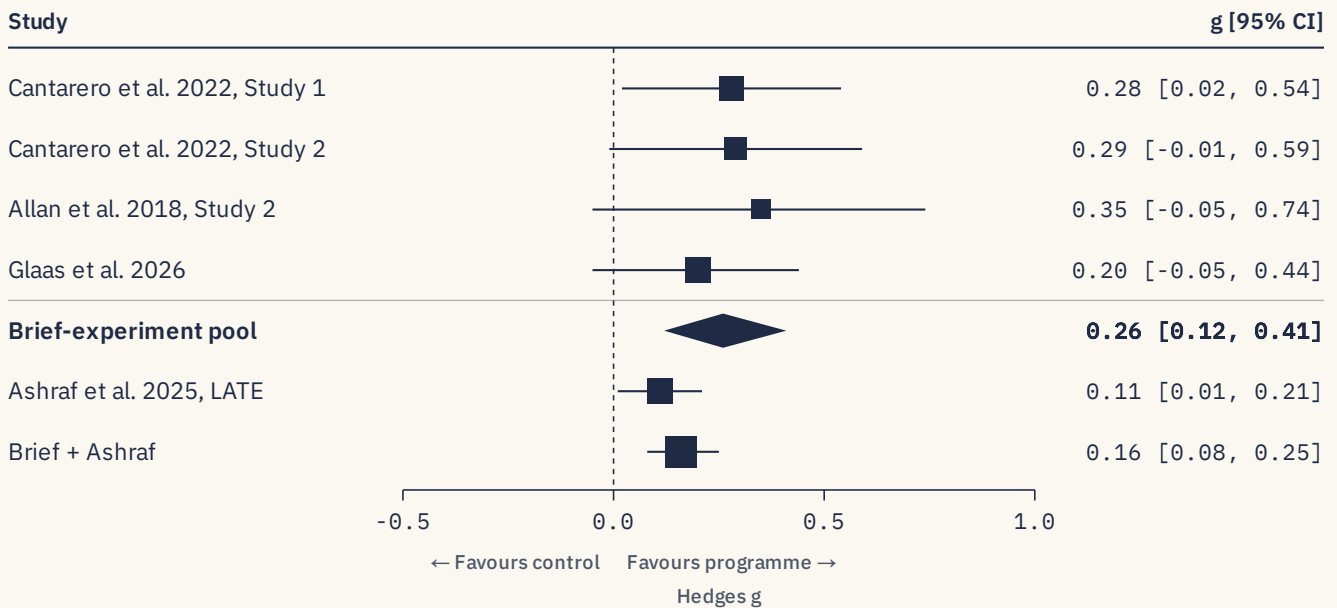


Figure 2. Forest plot, primary pool. Squares are sized by weight; the diamond is the pooled estimate.

Table 3. Meaning in work

| Study                          | $g$         | 95% CI              | Weight in brief pool % | Note                                             |
|--------------------------------|-------------|---------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Cantarero et al. 2022, Study 1 | 0.28        | 0.02 to 0.54        | 30.0                   | Verified d                                       |
| Cantarero et al. 2022, Study 2 | 0.29        | -0.01 to 0.59       | 22.5                   | Other-oriented vs control                        |
| Allan et al. 2018, Study 2     | 0.35        | -0.05 to 0.74       | 13.0                   | CI crosses zero                                  |
| Glaas et al. 2026              | 0.20        | -0.05 to 0.44       | 34.4                   | From $f^2 = 0.01$                                |
| <b>Brief-experiment pool</b>   | <b>0.26</b> | <b>0.12 to 0.41</b> | <b>100</b>             | $I^2 = 0\%$ ; 95% PI 0.08 to 0.45                |
| Ashraf et al. 2025, LATE       | 0.11        | 0.01 to 0.21        | —                      | Reported +0.111 SD; SE taken as 0.053            |
| <b>Brief + Ashraf</b>          | <b>0.16</b> | <b>0.08 to 0.25</b> | <b>Ashraf 66%</b>      | Different dose; field administrative plus survey |

Fletcher and Schofield (2021) again sits outside the numeric pool: meaning in work  $\gamma = 0.39$  ( $p < 0.05$ ); meaning at work  $\gamma = 0.70$  ( $p < 0.01$ ). The intervention group rose. The wait-list group held or fell. Variance explained in the time slope was 4.7% and 11.7%.

**Moderator table** *Table 4. Pre-specified moderators (narrative; k too small for a stable meta-regression)*

| Moderator         | What the trials show                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Intervention type | Other-oriented meaning writing beat self-oriented writing (Cantarero 2022, Study 2). Helping-others practice beat self-focused practice (Allan 2018). Purpose-discovery workshop raised meaning 0.11 SD and raised exits (Ashraf 2025). Values-and-meaning physician curriculum raised engagement in 2014 and a later coaching curriculum with a meaning theme did not (West 2014; Dyrbye 2019).                                    |
| Dose              | Single brief writing: $d \approx 0.28$ – $0.29$ on momentary outcomes. Five daily reflections: $f^2 = 0.01$ – $0.02$ , and the engagement effect was gone at one month. Two-hour workshop plus four weeks: $\gamma$ in the $0.24$ – $0.70$ range on meaning and organisation engagement. Eight-hour workshop plus two weeks of pre-work: 0.11 SD on meaning, +21% relative exits. More minutes did not produce a larger attitude g. |
| Delivery channel  | Online self-guided writing works for a same-day bump. Facilitated groups work when time is protected (West 2014) and do not automatically work when coaching is added to a full clinical load (Dyrbye 2019). WhatsApp-first delivery, which is how many Indian programmes actually run, was not tested in any included trial.                                                                                                       |
| Guidance          | Facilitated and self-guided both appear in the small positive cluster. The null coaching trial was facilitated. Guidance is not the active ingredient on current evidence.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Follow-up         | Most effects are immediate or three months. Glaas et al. (2026) lost the engagement effect at one month. Ashraf et al. (2025) tracked exits and performance for two years.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

**Heterogeneity** Statistical heterogeneity among the five extractable engagement effects was low ( $I^2 = 0\%$ ,  $\tau^2 = 0$ ,  $Q = 2.47$  on 4 degrees of freedom). That number is not a claim of sameness. The studies differ in construct (momentary versus standing engagement), dose (minutes versus hours), occupation (mixed online workers versus physicians versus German employees) and analytic conversion (two g values are approximated). Low  $I^2$  here mostly means the confidence intervals are wide enough to overlap. The prediction interval (0.07 to 0.46) is the fairer picture of what a new trial might find. Clinical heterogeneity remains the main caution.

**Publication bias** With  $k = 5$  we did not run Egger’s test or trim-and-fill as a confirmatory procedure. The protocol asked for those tests at  $k \geq 10$ . The pattern of the literature is still the usual one: brief positive experiments are easier to publish than long null field trials. Including Dyrbye et al. (2019) was a deliberate guard against that tilt. A trim-and-fill story that “adds” imaginary nulls would not change the practical reading: the effect is small.

**Risk of bias** No included trial was low risk across every RoB 2 domain.

- **Ashraf et al. 2025.** Low to some concerns. Randomised invitation. Intention-to-treat and compiler-average estimates. Administrative exits and performance reduce self-report bias. The programme was designed by the firm. Take-up was 65%. The paper is an NBER working paper, not yet a journal version. Domain 2 (deviations from intended intervention) and Domain 5 (selective reporting until the journal version) carry some concerns.
- **West et al. 2014.** Some concerns. Single site. Volunteer physicians. Unblinded self-report. Protected time is a second ingredient besides the curriculum.

- **Dyrbye et al. 2019.** Some concerns. Multi-site. Intention-to-treat. Null on the outcomes of interest, which lowers positive-result bias. Content was mixed coaching, not a pure meaning practice.
- **Fletcher and Schofield 2021.** Some concerns, and high on the randomisation domain for some participants. The authors note that random allocation “was not the case for some participants” because of intact teams and schedules. Wait-list.  $n = 80$ . No protocol.
- **Glaas et al. 2026.** Low to some concerns. Preregistered. Active control. The between-group story is a control-group decline, not an intervention-group rise. That is a real effect if the practice buffers a drop. It is not a rise in flourishing.
- **Cantarero et al. 2022.** Some concerns. True randomisation and open data. Outcomes are momentary. No follow-up. High internal validity for a same-day bump; low external validity for a CHRO dashboard.
- **Allan et al. 2018.** Some concerns. Short-term meaning only.
- **Ríos et al. 2025.** Some concerns. Wait-list  $n = 21$ . Military only. Only the combined arm moved presence of meaning.
- **Grant 2007, 2008.** Some concerns on small  $n$ ; outcomes are performance, not our scales.
- **Portocarrero and Burbano 2024.** Low risk on the turnover outcome (administrative). Eligibility for this review is only adjacent.

## GRADE

Table 5. Certainty of evidence

| Outcome            | <i>k</i>                | Effect                                                                                                 | Certainty      | Why it falls                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Meaning in work    | 4 brief + 1 large field | <b>Brief <math>g = 0.26</math> (0.12 to 0.41); with field RCT <math>g = 0.16</math> (0.08 to 0.25)</b> | Low            | Serious risk of bias; serious indirectness of dose; imprecision in the small trials. Ashraf is larger but still a working paper           |
| Work engagement    | 5 extractable           | $g = 0.26$ (0.13 to 0.40); PI 0.07 to 0.46                                                             | Low            | Serious risk of bias; serious indirectness (momentary vs trait); two approximated $g$ values. $I^2$ is low; clinical heterogeneity is not |
| Turnover intention | 0                       | Not estimable                                                                                          | Not rateable   | No eligible trial. Do not borrow Allan's $r \approx -0.49$                                                                                |
| Actual exits       | 1 in-scope + 1 adjacent | Ashraf +2.8 pp (+21% relative); Portocarrero -14 pp (different practice)                               | Low / very low | Single in-scope trial for purpose reflection; opposite sign in an adjacent CSR trial                                                      |

## 07

## Discussion

## PULL QUOTE

**Five minutes of other-oriented writing produced  $d = 0.29$  on momentary engagement.**

### What the number means

The engagement number is a small effect. In Cohen's old language, 0.26 is closer to small than to medium. In a workplace language it means this: if you line up two groups of 100 people, you will not see a transformation. You may see a few more people who can say, today, that the work is worth doing and that they are in it. Knight et al. (2017) found  $g = 0.29$  across a mixed bag of engagement programmes. Oprea et al. (2019) found  $g = 0.31$  across job-crafting programmes. Our meaning-specific pool sits in the same band. That is the honest headline. It is not a new law of nature. It is a small, repeatable bump from a cheap practice.

The meaning number tells the same story twice. Brief experiments cluster near  $g = 0.26$ . The large purpose workshop clusters near 0.11 SD. Those are not contradictions if you remember the outcome. A five-minute writing task measures a momentary judgement. An eight-hour workshop, scored months later against a multi-item index and against payroll, is a harder test. The harder test still moves meaning. It moves it less.

Turnover is the plot twist, and it is the number a CHRO will remember. Allan et al. (2019) found that people who already experience meaning also report lower withdrawal intentions ( $r \approx -0.49$ ). That association is real and large. It is not an intervention effect. When Ashraf, Bandiera, Minni and Zingales randomised a purpose-discovery programme among 2,976 white-collar employees, the annual exit rate rose 2.8 percentage points. Relative to the control base of 13.2%, that is a 21% increase. The rise was concentrated among people with low meaning and high pay, and among people whose performance sat below the line. About half of the drop in below-standard performance came from those people leaving. The other half came from stayers improving. The firm's internal rate of return was estimated at about 4% over one year and about 70% over two years if the performance effect held. Purpose, in that trial, was not a retention potion. It was a matching device. Some people looked hard at what they cared about, found it did not fit this job, and took it to another employer.

A second trial, Portocarrero and Burbano (2024), sent new bank hires to a one-day social-impact activity and saw actual turnover fall by about half at ten months. The authors point to organisational justice, not to a measured change in meaning. We do not pool the two trials. They are different practices. They do prove one joint point: "meaning work" is not one lever with one sign on exits.

Glaas et al. (2026) add a third caution. Their online cognitive-crafting week produced higher meaning and engagement than an active control, and the authors are clear that the control group fell while the practice group held. A practice that stops a drop is useful. It is not the same claim as “this programme raises engagement.” Any vendor slide that erases that sentence is selling a different paper.

Dyrbye et al. (2019) add a fourth. Six coaching sessions with an explicit meaning-in-work theme did not move meaning or engagement among physicians. Burnout fell. A null on our primary outcomes is not a failure of reporting. It is part of the evidence. We kept it in the pool so the  $g = 0.26$  figure would have to live with a zero.

Grant’s beneficiary-contact experiments remain the cleanest demonstration that a five-minute meeting with the person who receives the work can change behaviour. Callers spent 142% more time on the phone and raised 171% more money. Those are performance numbers. They are not engagement scores. They are the reason beneficiary contact stays inside the eligibility list even when the old trials did not use our scales.

## Limitations

This review has the limitations of its field. Most trials are small. Most outcomes are self-reported. Most follow-ups are short. Two  $g$  values in the engagement pool are conversions, not author-reported standardised mean differences. Fletcher and Schofield could not enter the numeric pool. The OSF 2025 diary trial is a preprint. Ashraf et al. is a working paper. We could not run a licensed dual-reviewer search of every database on one protocol registration. CTRI was empty, which is a finding, but empty registries do not prove empty drawers. India-only estimates do not exist in the in-scope set. WhatsApp-first delivery, which is how an Indian programme actually reaches people, was not tested. We did not name trademarked instruments. That choice protects the prose. It also means a methods purist cannot see the exact scale from this paper alone and must go to the primary reports.

The  $I^2 = 0\%$  figure will tempt a tidy summary. Resist it. Clinical heterogeneity is the real variance. A momentary writing effect and a two-year payroll effect should not be sold as one liquid.

### WHAT THIS MEANS

#### What this means for an Indian workplace programme

A meaning rep is a cheap experiment, not a retention guarantee. Start with other-oriented practice. Picture a claims team in Pune at the Monday huddle. Before the queue opens, each person posts one line in the team’s WhatsApp group, in the language they already use: one task today, one person it serves. “The retired teacher’s claim, so she can stop calling the branch.” That is the Cantarero and Grant move, and it is the closest thing this literature has to a daily countable rep. It takes minutes, not an eight-hour offsite. Then watch two numbers, not one.

Engagement may rise a little — think a quarter of a standard deviation, not a transformation. Exits may also rise. A few weeks in, one analyst notices that the people she most wants to help are not in this job at all, and hands in notice for a role that fits better. Budget for that. When a reflection lands on a poor fit, offer a human hand-off rather than leaving the person alone with a purpose statement and a resignation letter. Keep the data in India. Call it coaching, not treatment. Helping someone find what they care about is not the same act as making them stay.

#### Research gaps, with the India gap named

The first gap is turnover intention. It is the outcome every vendor slide implies and almost no trial measures. The second gap is India. CTRI holds no eligible workplace-meaning trial for employed professionals. Ashraf et al. included Indian white-collar staff and did not publish an India stratum. Indian job-crafting papers that we found are correlational, or uncontrolled, or sit in theses we could not verify as controlled trials. The third gap is language. No included trial was delivered in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi or any of the other languages in which Indian work actually happens. The fourth gap is channel. WhatsApp-first, mobile-first, low-bandwidth delivery is untested in this set. The fifth gap is dose as a planned contrast: one five-minute rep versus a four-week sequence versus a full-day workshop, randomised inside the same firm. The sixth gap is durability past three months on engagement scales, with administrative exits tracked in parallel so the Ashraf pattern can be replicated or refuted in an Indian services firm. Until those gaps close, a pooled  $g$  for turnover intention would be a fiction.

## 08

## FAQ

**Q1 Can a short meaning practice raise engagement at work?**

Yes, a little. Five meaning-specific controlled samples pooled at  $g = 0.26$  (95% CI 0.13 to 0.40). That is a small effect. It is in the same band as broader engagement programmes ( $g = 0.29$ ) and job-crafting programmes ( $g = 0.31$ ).

**Q2 Does training meaning cut the wish to quit?**

We do not know from trials. Zero eligible studies measured turnover intention. Correlational work finds  $r \approx -0.49$  between meaning and withdrawal intentions. That is not a causal estimate and we do not treat it as one.

**Q3 Will a purpose workshop reduce resignations?**

Not necessarily. In the 2,976-person purpose RCT the annual exit rate rose 2.8 percentage points, a 21% relative increase. Low-meaning, below-standard performers left or improved. The firm still saw a positive return if stayer performance held.

**Q4 Is five minutes enough, or do we need a full-day offsite?**

Five minutes can move a same-day judgement ( $d \approx 0.28-0.29$ ). A full-day purpose workshop moved a meaning index by 0.11 SD and changed exits over two years. Dose changes the outcome you are buying, not just the size of one  $g$ .

**Q5 Has any of this been tested with Indian professionals in an Indian-language programme?**

Not as a stand-alone, registered, meaning-at-work trial. CTIRI is empty. One multinational purpose RCT included India among 14 countries and did not report an India-only effect. That is the gap a domestic programme would close.

## 09

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| <hr/>                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| HOW TO CITE                                     | <p>Aswani A. Purpose at Work Pays: A Meta-Analysis of Meaning-in-Work Interventions on Engagement and Turnover Intention. EmotionApp Research Paper 27. Mumbai: Tranquilo Meditek Sytems Private Limited; 2026. <a href="https://emotionapp.in/research/purpose-at-work-pays">https://emotionapp.in/research/purpose-at-work-pays</a></p>                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <hr/>                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| LAST UPDATED                                    | Last updated 22 September 2026                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

NOTE

EmotionApp is a non-clinical emotional-fitness coaching platform. This paper describes practices, techniques and coaching. It is not therapy, treatment, diagnosis or medical advice.

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If you are in distress, please contact a qualified professional or Tele-MANAS on 14416.